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SUBJECT: PARLIAMENTARY REFORM VIEWED WITH SKEPTICISM

Classified By: PolCouns Craig M. Karp for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

¶1. (C) Summary: A parliamentary staffer from the Berber-dominated Mouvement Populaire (MP) political party recently told us that real constitutional reform was necessary to advance democracy, but unlikely in the near term. For now, the Parliament could exercise better the authority it already holds. Palace insider Fouad Ali El-Himma is on track to build a new political entity that could dominate Morocco's political scene, but is also reinforcing the tendency in Parliament to let the Palace "run the show." The (Islamist) Justice and Development Party (PJD), the second largest party in parliament, seems powerless in opposition, but is slowly increasing its political support in society. Islamic extremists are gaining political strength in prisons. Their sympathizers are building on their prisoner support movement to show the first signs of political organization. End summary.

¶2. (C) On June 6, 2008, Poloffs met with Abdelouahad Dryweish (strictly protect), a senior parliamentary staffer and key younger activist in the Mouvement Populaire, the Berber dominated party with the third largest bloc of seats in parliament. Dryweish said that many changes and reforms were needed to turn the Parliament into a quality institution capable of providing representation for the Moroccan people. USAID's parliamentary support program (implemented by SUNY - the State University of New York) was having a positive impact, with a focus on building parliament's capacity to exercise oversight of the state budget. Other reforms were needed such as the establishment of parliamentary research office, which would serve as a rough equivalent to the United States' Congressional Research Service. Morocco needed to catch up to other African countries that have such a capacity in their parliaments already, he opined.

¶3. (C) Dryweish said Constitutional amendments were prerequisite to real structural transformation, adding that leading opposition politicians, like PJD Deputy Secretary General Lahcen Daoudi, were openly calling for Constitutional reforms. Seemingly resigned to the notion that constitutional reform was an unlikely possibility in the near term, Dryweish said that many key improvements could be made short of re-writing the Constitution. One such element could be the voluntary withdrawal of the Palace from meddling in the internal machinations of the Parliament. He complained that currently, many Parliamentarians use their offices merely as a means of positioning themselves to receive favors and political rewards from the Palace, implying that the Palace rewards this behind the scenes patronage. There exists "a paralyzing culture of subservience to the Monarchy among most Parliamentarians," according to Dryweish, killing any initiative of the institution as a whole. Dryweish complained that some powers of the Parliament are simply never exercised, citing the Parliament's supposed power to censure the government. Dryweish added that he thought that Parliament should be more involved in the dialogue regarding security issues. (Note: security issues are generally considered part of the "sovereign ministries," an exclusive domain of the Palace. Parliament has been trying to insert itself gradually into the process by calling for hearings of

the relevant Ministers.)

¶4. (C) Thinking out loud, Dryweish opined that perhaps the controversial entry of Royal intimate Fouad Ali El-Himma to the Parliament as a MP may be a positive development for Parliamentary reform. Perhaps El-Himma will be able to demonstrate to other Parliamentarians that they do not necessarily have to wait on the Palace or the Interior Ministry before taking political initiatives; "perhaps al-Himma can break the cycle of subservience." Unfortunately, El-Himma had not publicly concentrated on issues of real substance, including Parliamentary reform.

¶5. (C) The Movement of All Democrats (MTD), the broad political association led by El-Himma, is growing stronger. El-Himma appeared to use a recent conference in Marrakech for alliance building with established political parties like the pro-Palace/centrist Rally of National Independents (RNI) and the Berber-dominated MP. El-Himma was also swamped by conference attendees who were apparently more interested in getting him to pass notes petitioning the King for personal favors or assistance than they were in discussing the MTD's political strategy. Apparently detracting from any reformist credentials, El-Himma was challenged by a young Berber activist who asked him how MTD, a registered civil association, was allowed to openly conduct political activities, when Moroccan law expressly limits such activities to registered political parties. El-Himma was reportedly "blindsided" by the question and unable to offer a coherent response.

¶6. (C) Another part of El-Himma's political strategy is reaching out to universities. Dryweish opined that part of El-Himma's motivation is to cultivate a new generation of supporters for the MTD, carving out a place for MTD discourse at the university level: a space currently dominated by Islamist and Amazigh (Berber) organizations.

¶7. (C) Dryweish speculated that the Palace, through El Himma, appeared to be trying to establish three political poles within the Parliament. These poles included the Koutla (i.e., the ruling minority coalition including the conservative Istiqlal, the leftist Socialist Union of Popular Forces (USFP) and Party of Progress and Socialism (PPS); the "Liberal pole" (i.e., led by al-Himma, MP, RNI, Constitutional Union (UC), among other small parties); and the Islamist parties (i.e., principally the PJD). Due to leadership problems, the MP had lost its bearings after being excluded from the coalition following the fall 2007 elections. Now the party was hoping to receive a signal from El-Himma or the King that it would be permitted to join the MTD. If offered, the MP would readily join, he said.

¶8. (C) The Islamist PJD, which received the most popular votes and took the second largest number of parliamentary seats last fall, held little institutional power, being an opposition party in an already weak parliament. However, the PJD marshaled considerable political influence in society writ-large, according to Dryweish.

¶9. Meanwhile, sympathizers of the Moroccan Salafia Jihadia (MSJ or SJ) were becoming increasingly strong and organized in prisons, where SJ adherents, paradoxically, gain credibility among fellow adherents, and public sympathizers, for being incarcerated, according to Dryweish. SJ is not a coherent organization, but rather a term used by Moroccan authorities to generically describe radicals, terrorists, and cells they form subscribing to an extreme fundamentalist Islamic ideology in Morocco. SJ sympathizers were also becoming increasingly organized, in part through the prisoner support movement, and in three to four years may enter mainstream politics, even participating in the political process. Dryweish said that the recent photo distributed widely on the internet of the local Chief of Moroccan Police in Casablanca beating a woman, who was demonstrating for improved prison conditions for her husband who was incarcerated for extremist activity, had garnered huge resonance among SJ sympathizers and was a propaganda coup for

jihadists.

¶10. (C) Comment: Many observers share Dryweish's skepticism about near term prospects for constitutional change, while whispering their preference for it. This has reinforced our strategy of enhancing institutional capacity as a prerequisite for reform. Most party leaders and Parliamentarians, with the exception of those from the PJD, opt publicly for the second approach. Continuation of the status quo is having a deleterious effect on the Moroccan polity's faith in the Parliament and political parties, as witnessed by the low voter turnout in September Parliamentary elections. On the margins, the PJD appears to be garnering political points and the grudging respect of other parties, for at least publicly admitting the problem and calling for constitutional reform.

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